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ABSTRACT

A study tested a method for teaching preservice teachers enrolled in a basic speech course how to lead classroom discussions. In addition, the study examined the effects of communication apprehension and size of audience on students' satisfaction with the assignment. The students were administered a measure of communication apprehension and assigned to one of two groups. Those in the first group led discussions within a small group of five or six students, while those in the second group led discussions before the entire class. Students in both groups were required to adhere to the following format: (1) introduce the discussion topic; (2) ask a preplanned question and wait for an answer; (3) react to the audience's response with a comment, a probe, or a reflective summary; (4) ask another question and repeat the third step; and (5) summarize and conclude the discussion. Student reaction to the assignment was measured with a questionnaire. The results confirmed that classroom discussion was perceived as an effective teaching method by students. In addition, students who lead small group discussions were less apprehensive than those who lead entire class discussions, and highly apprehensive students rated small group discussion assignments among their preferred assignments more frequently than did low apprehensive students. (The student questionnaire is appended.) (FL)

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A METHOD FOR TEACHING APPREHENSIVE STUDENTS TO LEAD CLASSROOM DISCUSSIONS

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(A Paper Presented to the 67th Annual Convention of the Speech Communication Association, Anaheim, California, November 13, 1981).

Educators have long been aware of the importance of knowing "how" to ask questions when leading a classroom discussion. Effective question-asking seems to not only enrich class participation and interaction among students, but also enhances students understanding of the subject duscussed.[1] Yet, even the most experienced of teachers knows how difficult it is to develop appropriate question-asking strategies. This difficulty is compounded by the fact that questions asked by teachers typically test only a students' recall of information, and not higher levels of learning, such as synthesis and evaluation of information.[2]

In a recent text on speech communication education, Cooper considered the importance of improving classroom questioning strategies.[3] For example, she offered several strategies designed to improve the effectiveness of classroom discussions. The purpose of this study was to apply and test a method for teaching pre-education students at the University of Hawaii how to initiate and lead a classroom discussion. The method tested was a classroom assignment

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designed to assist students in learning appropriate question-asking strategies for leading classroom discussions. Emphasis was placed on teaching students how to facilitate the participation of other students enrolled in the course.

The assignment was designed as an extension of the interviewing and small group discussion units of the course. The interviewing unit stressed the importance of preparing and asking a variety of questions when gathering information from others. The small group discussion unit stressed the importance of learning appropriate verbal and nonverbal behaviors necessary for effective participation in small group discussions (e.g., initiating information, harmonizing differences of opinion, summarizing the contributions of others, etc.).

The assignment also provided students with public speaking experience prior to the formal speeches required in the course. Public speaking skills required for this assignment included the preparation of an introduction and a conclusion to the discussion along with the questions to be asked in covering the main points of the discussion. Finally, the assignment was designed to help students understand the nature of "communication as a process." For example, the principle of audience adaption was emphasized by requiring students to provide reflective feedback and probing questions when responding to the class. These questions could not be prepared until the discussion was in

progress. The conclusion of the dicussion also required students to summarize and synthesize class comments provided during the discussion in addition to stating their own preplanned remarks.

In summary, the students were required to integrate the communication skills they had learned to this point in the course and adhere to the following format: (1) introduce the discussion topic, (2) ask a preplanned question and wait for an answer, (3) respond to the audience's response with a comment, a probe, or a reflective summary, (4) ask other questions and repeat step 3, and (5) summarize and conclude the discussion.

METHOD

Two variables were tested as possible factors influencing student satisfaction with the assignment. They were (1) students' level of communication apprehension and (2) size of audience led in discussion.

Communication apprehension was established with the Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (PRCA-20 form) to determine whether level of apprehension would affect student performance on the assignment.[4] (The PRCA was administered during the first week of Fall Semester, 1980.) Audience size was included to determine whether student performance might be affected by the number of group participants each student was assigned to lead in discussion.

Gender differences were eliminated from consideration as only nine males participated in the study.

Two groups of students participated in the study. One group of students (n = 26) was assigned to individually lead a discussion within a small group of five or six students on a topic of their own selection. The other group of students (n = 19) was assigned to individually lead a discussion before the entire class.

Each group was provided detailed instructions for leading the discussion. Students within each group were instructed to lead an 8-10 minute discussion for which they provided a one-minute introduction of the topic followed by specific questions designed to stimulate a class discussion of the topic. Students were instructed to prepare different types of questions in leading the discussion. As the discussion developed, they were instructed to direct the class by summarizing class comments and asking additional questions so that the discussion would become "class-centered" rather than "teacher-centered". Thus, each discussion leader was encouraged to get students to interact with each other. Finally, discussion leaders were required to present a one-minute conclusion in which they summarized the results of the discussion.

Reactions to the assignment were measured through student responses to a 14-item questionnaire. The questionnaire evaluated students' perception of the assignment in

comparison to other classroom speaking activities. Specifically, students evaluated this assignment as a teaching method for practicing various communcation skills. Students also reported their attitudes toward the assignment (i.e., satisfaction with their performance and apprehension about the assignment). A copy of the questionnaire may be found in the appendix of this paper.

Statistical analysis for audience size included T-tests for independent samples.[5] Communication apprehension also was tested with T-tests. PRCA scores were available for only 40 of the 45 students. Thus, apprehension was treated on only two levels (high apprehension = 98-71, low apprehension = 70-48).. These levels correspond with normative data derived from the PRCA-short form.[6] That is, scores falling one standard deviation above the mean of 60 may be considered apprehensive. Spearman correlations also were tested between PRCA items and the questionnaire items. The overall ranking of course assignments was analyzed with Chi-square tests. The assignments ranking among the top half of all course assignments were assigned a plus value. All other assignments were treated as a minus.

RESULTS

The overall results generally confirmed that the classroom discussion assignment is perceived as an effective teaching method by students. Grand means on the 14-item

questionnaire revealed that the assignment demonstrated to students the importance of phrasing different types of questions learned in the interviewing unit of the course ($\bar{X}$ = 4.36, SD = .71). The assignment also demonstrated the principle of audience adaptation. Specifically, students recognized the importance of rephrasing their prepared questions as well as asking questions they had not prepared to ask during the discussion ($\bar{X}$ = 3.77, SD = 1.19).

The overall results also indicated that the assignment provided an effective transition to the public speaking unit of the course. Students indicated that the assignment helped them feel more relaxed during public speaking ($\bar{X}$ = 3.91, SD = .93) and helped them prepare the introduction and the conclusion to their speech ($\bar{X}$ = 3.82, SD = .83). Also, students noted that prior experience in small group discussion assisted them in leading the classroom discussion ($\bar{X}$ = 4.17, SD = .86).

Communication apprehension did not consistently affect reactions to the assignment. However, high apprehensive students were more concerned with the importance of phrasing questions during the discussion than low apprehensive students. Table 1 reports the effects of communication apprehension on phrasing questions for the discussion. Four additional questionnaire items yielded higher mean scores of .50 for apprehension level, although they were not significantly different between high and low apprehensive students.

First, apprehensive students felt the small group discussion assignment helped in preparing them for the classroom discussion ($t = 1.32$, $df = 38$, $p = .19$). High apprehensive students also favored the classroom discussion because they preferred the direct interaction that the assignment provided them with the class ($t = .99$, $df = 38$, $p = .40$) that was not apparent when lecturing ($t = 1.40$, $df = 38$, $p = .17$). Finally, high apprehensive students expressed greater satisfaction with their performance on the assignment than the low apprehensive students ($t = 1.32$, $df = 38$, $p = .18$).

When item-to-item correlations were analyzed, a significant trend emerged among the PRCA public speaking items and the questionnaire items. Students who indicated that they were likely to "tremble when handling objects on the platform" preferred the classroom discussion assignment over public speaking (rho = .39, $p = .01$), felt more at ease during the classroom discussion (rho = .36, $p = .02$), felt more satisfied with their performance on the classroom discussion (, = .32, $p = .03$), and preferred leading a second classroom discussion more than delivering another speech (rho = .34, $p = .02$).

Similar correlations were observed for students who were "fearful and tense while speaking before a group of people." These students preferred the classroom discussion because they could directly interact with their audience (rho = .45, $p = .01$) and preferred prior experience in small

group discussion before leading the classroom discussion (rho = .39, p = .01). Correlations were observed for those students who "always avoid speaking in public if possible." These students felt more at ease during the classroom discussion than public speaking (rho = .32, p = .03), preferred the discussion because they could directly interact with their audience (rho = .31, p = .03), and preferred that the classroom discussion assignment be assigned after some initial public speaking experience (rho = .32, p = .03).

Two of the highest correlations were found for students who "feel self-conscious when called on in class" and are "nervous in a conversation with a new acquaintance." These students were more satisfied with their performance on the discussion assignment than the public speaking assignment (rho = .45, p = .01) and preferred a second discussion more than any other assignment in the course (rho = .45, p = .01). Although the correlations generally indicated a weak relationship between PRCA and questionnaire items, the students' level of apprehension may have significantly decreased from the first week of the semester, when the PRCA was administered, and the last three weeks of the semester when the classroom discussion was conducted.

Significant differences also were observed for size of audience led during discussion. Students who presented the discussion in small groups rather than before the entire class

(1) felt more at ease during the public speaking assignment than students who presented their discussion before the entire class, (2) preferred the classroom discussion to public speaking, and (3) preferred speaking within a small group because they could interact directly with the audience. Table 2 reports the results for this analysis.

The overall ranking of course assignments indicated that communication apprehension significantly affected subjects' ranking of two of the course assignments. Specifically, the high apprehensive students rated the small group and classroom discussion assignments among their preferred assignments more consistently than the low apprehensive students. The remaining assignments -- the counseling interview, informative speech, and the lecture presentation -- were ranked similarly by both the low and high apprehensive students. Table 3 reports the effects of communication apprehension on ranking of the classroom discussion.

Size of audience led during the discussion also affected the overall ranking of course assignments. The classroom discussion was ranked among the highest rated course assignments for students who presented their discussion before the entire class rather than within the small group. However, differences were not found with the other course assignments. Table 4 reports Chi-square results for the effects of audience size on overall ranking of the classroom discussion.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study indicate that the classroom discussion is an effective learning method. The assignment seems to show students that the phrasing of questions is as important to discussion as it is to interviewing. The assignment also provides an effective transition between the small group and public speaking units of the basic course.

The results also indicate that the assignment may be a potentially effective mediator of apprehension about speaking in the classroom. The apprehensive student adapts better to the classroom discussion than to public speaking. This may suggest that the apprehensive speaker's perceptions of the assignment are influenced by the type of feedback the assignment provides (i.e., more direct interaction with the audience). Possibly, the more direct feedback provided by the classroom discussion demonstrated to students their effectiveness as discussion leaders or perhaps not occupying the central speaking role helped ease their tension. The apprehensive speaker also seems to be more aware of the importance of communication skills during the discussion (i.e., phrasing of question), thus suggesting that reducing one's fear of speaking facilitates the learning of communication skills or that apprehensive speakers simply pay more attention to their skills level while speaking.

These results suggest that high apprehensive speakers

may experience less anxiety about public speaking if alternative assignments are constructed before public speaking. Perhaps for the low apprehensive speaker the familiar speech guideline holds true that experience in speaking is often the best teacher. For the highly apprehensive speaker, however, experience may only be as effective as the method of instruction.

Thus, the instructor may consider a variety of instructional strategies for designing speaking assignments in the basic course. Since the classroom discussion encompasses interviewing, group discussion, and public communication skills, the discussion may prove most useful to students if they gain initial experience in each area before leading the discussion.

Four instructional strategies supported by the results of this study for structuring the format of the classroom discussion include: (1) having students first participate in problem-solving discussion groups before leading the classroom discussion, (2) practicing the classroom discussion within small groups before leading the graded discussion, (3) having students present a public speech in front of half the class, and (4) assigning students to lead the classroom discussion in front of the entire class.

Steps 1 and 2 should be regarded as central to designing the classroom discussion assignment. These steps provide initial experience in practicing the skills essential to the classroom discussion. Step 3 also may prove a useful

mediator of apprehension. Since the classroom discussion is the first speaking experience in front of the entire class, students may experience less anxiety if gradually introduced to larger audiences. In step 4, discussion is suggested in front of the entire class rather than within small groups of students. This recommendation is based on the apparent inconsistency among attitudinal measures employed in evaluating the assignment. Although students felt more at ease and preferred the direct interaction when leading the discussion within small groups, the assignment was ranked more favorable in relation to other assignments when delivered before the entire class.

Unfortunately, additional data is not available to explain these effects. However, it may be hypothesized that feeling comfortable or at ease does not necessarily increase self-confidence. Inadequate cell sizes did not permit two-way analysis of variance between communication apprehension and audience size. Thus, this conclusion should be cautiously accepted since interaction effects could not be determined. However, high apprehensives were equally distributed between both levels of audience size. Thus, it may be hypothesized that some degree of tension or arousal is useful in motivating students to communicate effectively (i.e., phrase questions effectively) in order to reduce their apprehension. This interpretation of the findings only provides indirect support for Phillips' hypothesis that tension is a powerful source

or motivation.[7] However, future investigations may provide a direct confirmation of the hypothesis by manipulating the anxiety level of speaking assignments. The manipulation of additional variables and an increase in the number of subjects tested will permit more sophisticated analyses in follow-up studies for determing the effects of communication apprehension on performing alternative oral communication assignments in the basic course. Should alternative strategies for teaching communication skills be confirmed, we also may find that students best learn these skills through experimentation within non-threatening learning environments that are enhanced, in part, by the graduated sequence in which the course assignments are structured.

FOOTNOTES

1. See, for example: W. McKeachie, Teaching Tips (Lexington, Mass.: D. C. Heath & Co., 1969), p. 37; B. Rosenshine, Teaching Behaviors and Student Achievement (Slough, NFER, 1971); and J. F. Deethardt, "The Use of Questions in the Speech-Communication Classroom," Speech Teacher, 23 (1974), pp. 15-20.

2. See, for example: M. Gall, "The Use of Questions in Teaching," Review of Education Research, 40 (1970), pp. 707-21; and O. Hargie, "The Importance of Teacher Questions in the Classroom," Educational Research 20 (1978), pp. 99-102.

3. P. J. Cooper, Speech Communication for the Classroom Teacher (Dubuque, Iowa: Gorsuch Scarisbrick, 1981), pp. 117-28.

4. J. C. McCroskey, "Measures of Communication Bound Anxiety, Speech Monographs, 37 (1970), 269-77.

5. N. H. Nie, J. G. Jenkins, K. Steinbrenner, & D. Brent, Statistical Packages for the Social Sciences (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1975).

6. McCroskey, "Measures of Communication Bound Anxiety," 269-77.

7. G. M. Phillips, "Rhetoritherapy versus the Medical Model: Dealing with Reticence," Communication Education 26 (1977) 34-43.

Speech 200 Questionnaire

We would appreciate your feedback and reactions to the classroom discussion assignment in which you each performed the role of discussion leader. Please use the following scale in stating your reactions to the assignment:

1=Strongly Agree 2=Agree 3=Uncertain 4=Disagree 5=Strongly Disagree

1. _____The classroom discussion assignment demonstrated to me the importance of being able to phrase different types of questions that were taught during the interviewing unit of the course.
2. _____Participation in small group communication before the classroom discussion helped me in leading the classroom discussion more effectively.
3. _____I liked leading the classroom discussion more than I liked delivering the public speeches.
4. _____The classroom discussion assignment helped me feel more at ease when giving the public speech assignments.
5. _____I felt more at ease during the classroom discussion than I did during the public speeches.
6. _____I preferred the classroom discussion assignment more than the public speeches because I could directly interact with my audience.
7. _____I would prefer leading the classroom discussion over a topic assigned by the instructor rather than selecting my own topic.
8. _____Having to prepare the introduction and the conclusion for the classroom discussion helped me in preparing the introduction and the conclusion for the public speaking assignments.
9. _____If I were to lead another classroom discussion I would prefer doing so in a small group of students instead of before the entire class.
10. _____I think the classroom discussion assignment should have been assigned after I had an opportunity to deliver a public speech.
11. _____Even though I prepared questions for the classroom discussion, I found that I had to rephrase them or ask questions I had not prepared in advance of the assignment.
12. _____The classroom discussion assignment demonstrated to me that it is more difficult to interact with the class than it is to lecture to the class.
13. _____I would prefer doing a second classroom discussion assignment more than any other assignment in the course.
14. _____Overall, I was more satisfied with my performance on the classroom discussion assignment than I was with any other assignment in the course.

Would you please rank in order of preference the course assignments that were of most benefit to you (with 1 being the most benefit):

____Information-Gathering Interview
____Small Group Presentation
____Leading the Classroom Discussion
____Public Speaking Assignments
____Counseling Interview
____Quizzes
____Text Experiences
____OTHER_____

Table 1

Effects of Communication Apprehension

on the Classroom Discussion

Variable	df	Low App X	High App X	t-value
Phrasing Questions	38	4.58	4.17	1.81*

*p = .08

Table 2

Effects of Audience Size

on the Classroom Discussion

Variable	df	Small Group X	Entire Class X	t-value
Prefer Discussion	38	3.61	2.84	2.12*
Felt at Ease	38	3.84	3.10	1.96**
Prefer Small Group	38	3.96	3.31	1.93**

*p = .04

**p = .06

Table 3

Effects of Communication Apprehension

on Preferences for the Classroom Discussion

Level of Apprehension	N	Percentage Ranking of the Assignment	
		Top Half	Bottom Half
High App	17	47%	53%
Low App	23	26%	74%
		$X^2 = 4.94$ with 1 df ($p = .04$)	

Table 4

Effects of Audience Size on

Preferences for the Classroom Discussion

Size of Audience	N	Percentage Ranking of the Assignment	
		Top Half	Bottom Half
Small Group	26	23%	77%
Entire Class	19	62%	38%
		$X^2 = 7.34$ with 1 df ($p = .01$)	